RCA
VOC FOR IOP/FH
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0823 MAY 21, 1976
ROBERTS/BEIRUT

BEIRUT NOTEBOOK

ANNCR:

FROM BEIRUT, VOA'S DOUGLAS ROBERTS HAS THESE REFLECTIONS ON THE SITUATION IN WAR-TORN LEBANON.

VOICE:

(OPT) THIS MORNING'S MAIL BROUGHT A LETTER FROM MY FATHER, WHO IS CURRENTLY ON A VISIT ON LONDON. AFTER THE USUAL EXPRESSIONS OF PATERNAL CONCERN FOR A SON WORKING AMIDST AN URBAN BATTLEGROUND, HE MADE IT PERFECTLY CLEAR THAT HE CAN MAKE NEITHER HEADS NOR TAILS OF THE THIRTEEN-MONTH-OLD CONFLICT IN LEBANON. POINTING OUT THAT LEBANON'S STORY IS DAILY SPLASHED ACROSS THE FRONT PAGES OF THE BRITISH PRESS, HE ADDED THAT NONE OF THE MEDIA ACCOUNTS HAS REALLY GIVEN HIM A CLEAR PICTURE OF WHO'S FIGHTING WHOM. HE REFERRED TO STORIES ABOUT RIGHTISTS FIGHTING LEFTISTS, CHRISTIANS FIGHTING MOSLEMS, PALESTINIANS ALLIED WITH SYRIA, AND THE RIGHTISTS AND CHRISTIANS, AND OTHER PALESTINIANS FIGHTING WITH LEFTISTS AND MOSLEMS.

ADMITTEDLY, (END OPT) THE SITUATION HERE IS HOPELESSLY COMPLEX. BUT WHAT SEEMS MOST IMPORTANT TO THE ORDINARY CITIZENS OF THIS EMBATTLED CITY IS NOT WHO'S FIGHTING WHOM, BUT WHERE THEY ARE FIGHTING AT ANY GIVEN TIME. MOST BEIRUT RADIO STATIONS CARRY DETAILED ACCOUNTS OF WHAT THEY CALL THE SECURITY SITUATION EVERY FEW HOURS, WARNING RESIDENTS THAT SUCH AND SUCH AREA IS UNSAFE OR THAT ANOTHER IS NOW CALM BECAUSE THE FIGHTING HAS SHIFTED TO YET ANOTHER DISTRICT. WITH THESE BROADCASTS FOR A GUIDE, BEIRUT RESIDENTS EXERCISE AN EXTRAORDINARY TALENT FOR MAINTAINING SOME SEMBLANCE OF

NORMALTY IN THEIR LIVES, DESPITE THE IMPOSSIBLE CIRCUMSTANCES RADIO BROADCASTS ALSO INCLUDE GRIM ACCOUNTS OF THE NUMBERS OF DEAD AND WOUNDED, HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED AND HOW MANY BODIES DISCOVERED ON A DESERTED STREET OR IN THE RUBBLE OF A BURNT OUT BUILDING.

SOME PARTS THIS SEASIDE CAPITAL HAVE BEEN VIRTUALLY DESERTED FOR MONTHS... DEVASTATED DURING STREET BATTLES BETWEEN RIVAL MILITIAMEN. BEIRUT'S ONCE FASHIONABLE HAMRA STREET IS ONE OF THE FEW AREAS OF THIS CITY THAT REMAIN ACTIVE. MOST SHOPS ARE CLOSED, BUT SIDEWALK COMMERCE IS BOOMING. AND YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN STILL PARADE UP AND DOWN HAMRA STREET IN THE LATEST EUROPEAN FASHIONS. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT THE DISTRICT HAS BEEN SPARED FROM THE FIGHTING. OCCASIONAL ARTILLERY BLASTS NEARBY ARE ENOUGH TO SEND MOST OF THE SHOPPERS AND STROLLERS SCURRYING FOR COVER.

DESPITE THE HATRED AND BUSINESS ENGENDERED BY MORE THAN A YEAR OF CIVIL WAR AND POLITICAL CHAOS, THE VAST MAJORITY OF ORDINARY PEOPLE HERE SEEM TO WANT ONLY ONE THING: AN END TO THE BLOODSHED. A HAPHAZARD SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH LEBANESE CHRISTIANS AND MOSLEMS AND SOME PALESTINIANS REVEALED THAT MANY PEOPLE HERE HAVE LOST CONFIDENCE IN THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL LEADERS ESPECIALLY, IN THEIR ABILITY TO SEPARATE THE WARRING FACTIONS.

ABU HASSAN, A PALESTINIAN IN HIS MID-FIFTIES SAT ON THE STEPS OF AN APARTMENT BUILDING HERE WHERE HE WORKS AS A JANITOR, AND TOLD ME HE SEES LITTLE REASON FOR OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE. SOMETIMES, THE GUNMAN STOPPED SHOOTING FOR A FEW DAYS, HE SAID, BUT THEY ALWAYS START AGAIN. A BURST OF MACHINE-GUN FIRE ONLY A FEW BLOCKS AWAY SEEMED TO EMPHASIZE

HIS POINT. AND ABU HASSAN'S BROTHER, FEROUK, NODDED HIS HEAD IN THE DIRECTION OF THE FIRING AND SAID, WITH A GRIM SMILE, IT HAS BECOME THE MUSIC OF LEBANON. NEARBY, A PLUMP GRAY-HAIRED SHOPKEEPER SHRUGGED HIS SHOULDERS AND SAID, HE NO LONGER UNDERSTANDS WHAT THE WAR IS ALL ABOUT. AND EVEN IN THE BEGINNING, HE SAID, THERE WERE SO MANY DIFFERENT FACTIONS MAKING SO MANY DEMANDS THAT MANY PEOPLE WERE TOTALLY CONFUSED. (OPT) IF SOME LEBANESE ARE CONFUSED, IT IS EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY FOREIGNERS, LIKE MY FATHER, FIND THE LEBANESE CRISIS TOTALLY INCOMPREHENSIBLE. (END OPT)

JS/PY